Human Migrations and Mobility: Insights and Current Paths

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On Interpreting 'Peninsula' and the Japanese 半島 'Half-Island'

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Abstract

People interpret unfamiliar compounds by combining the component concepts into a new, complex concept. When the constituents have foreign roots, as happens in English neoclassical compounds and in Japanese words borrowed from Chinese, interpreters must first assign a semantic gloss to each component. The decoding of *peninsula* and 半島 follows such a pattern. But whilst construing and processing *peninsula* and the Latin *paene insula* as 'almost island' is relatively simple, inferring the denotation of 半島 is more complicated because gloss assignment yields the opaque 'half-island'. In the end, though, the interpretative process succeeds in this case as well, thanks to world-knowledge validation, and allows interpreters to understand that 'half-islands' are not islands at all.

Keywords: compounding; conceptual combination; Japanese; peninsula; Takao Suzuki.

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1. Introduction

In English, Japanese and many other languages, words can be formed by conjoining two or more elements, each of which carries a particular semantics. The sense of such words derives from the combination of the meanings of the constituents. For instance, *rainforest*, a two-noun compound, denotes a type of forest whose growth is dependent on the moisture and humidity ensured by frequent rainfall. Thus, when facing a novel compound, speakers can attempt to interpret it by assembling the meaning of each of its elements. This process is called 'conceptual combination'. As I will reconstruct it here, it requires three distinct operations: retrieving the meanings of all the constituents, assembling

them in a semantically consistent way, thus obtaining the literal sense of the parent expression, and finally checking world knowledge for entities matching that sense, in order to validate the entire process (Murphy 1988; Allan 2006; Gagné and Spalding 2006). At the end, interpreters obtain the description of a plausible object and, if they are already acquainted with it, can even activate their relevant encyclopedic file and add new, contextual information to it.

In this article, I will retrace the process required to decode *paenīnsula*, *peninsula*, and the Japanese equivalent, 半島, based on their written notation. In general, landscape terms are monomorphemic, as are, for instance, 'sea' (Japanese *umi*), 'hill' (*oka*), 'dale' (*tani*), etc.. The inferential process to construe them is the same as that required for simplex nouns like 'bear', 'tree' or 'car' when opaque to the interpreter. As such, it is of little interest to the study of the link between geography and linguistics. The Latin, English and Japanese generics for 'peninsula', however, are complex, analyzable terms in that they are similar to proper names, i.e., noun phrases that identify unique entities by means of elements of different word categories (Carroll 1985; Cumming 2019). It is this type of singular term which is the focus of the linguistic study of geographical nomenclature. Discussing the interpretation of intermediate forms like *paenīnsula* and 半島 will allow a better understanding of the difference between the two opposite types of expressions, for, whereas semantic transparency is crucial to infer the intension of generic compounds, it is actually irrelevant to retrieve the extension of toponyms. As Carroll (1985) points out (see also Recanati 1993 and Jeshion 2009), a proper name's descriptive content only helps fix the reference at the moment of baptism. In a toponym, it expresses the link between landscape and human experience. Afterwards, though, a toponym soon becomes a directly-referring expression, as its opacity enhances a sense of collective identity among the users. This, in turn, creates a sense of attachment to the name itself (Kostanski 2016), which further strengthens that to the geographical feature.

2. Methodology and sources

In my analysis I will follow the model proposed by Takao Suzuki (1926-2021), an influential Japanese sociologist of language:

> I do not hesitate to say that if one can explain the etymology of this common word [*peninsula*], he is a well-educated person. *Pen-* in fact comes from Latin *paene* 'almost' and *-insula* 'island'. The Japanese equivalent for peninsula is 半島. This is certainly not a difficult term either. But a remarkable difference is that almost all Japanese can tell the literal meaning of it, if called upon to do so. By the *kun* reading, it becomes *nakaba-shima* 'half island', even though people are rarely conscious of this fact. (Suzuki 1975, 189)

Suzuki's model of conceptual combination, which he developed during his lifetime (the most relevant works being 1975; 1978; 1990; 2014), is based on first translating a compound's constituents individually by means of assigning a word of corresponding meaning to each of them. What *peninsula* and 半島 share, Suzuki's general argument goes, is that they are both composed of foreign elements. In 半島, the two characters are Chinese ideograms. Their Japanese translatants, *nakaba* 'half' and *shima* 'island', respectively, are formally learnt at school as early as the 2nd and 3rd grade (*Monbukagakushō* 2009). Thus, to interpret 半島, the Japanese reader needs only to gloss each character with the corresponding Japanese lexeme, obtain a pair of concepts, and combine them. As for *peninsula*, the elements *pen* and *insula* are of Latin origin and similarly alien to English, but if the reader could just gloss them in their own language, as 'quasi', 'semi' (two more foreign roots, actually) or 'almost', and 'island', they, too, would be able to assemble the concepts and understand the word. The problem, Suzuki points out, is that English speakers are not taught about those roots at school. Only experts know them. This makes Japanese more transparent than English for as far as neoclassical compounds are concerned (1975, 188-189; 1978, 8; 2014, 210): a fact that Suzuki, a committed representative of Japanese linguistic nationalism, exploits in order to show Japanese superiority over English.

The constituents of the Japanese and Latin terms are indeed very similar from a functional perspective and the strategy to combine them is the same. What Suzuki overlooks, though, is that interpreting 'almost' in relation to islands is conceptually quite different from construing 'half' as 'almost'. I will, therefore, discuss Suzuki's model from a more refined theoretical perspective. As regards the morphology and analysis of compounds, I will make use of the latest classification by Scalise and Bisetto (2011), Bauer (2017), and of the study of Japanese compounds by Kageyama (1982) and Namiki and Kageyama (2016). When dealing with the processing of unfamiliar compounds I will follow a computational approach based on the constraint theory. Within this framework, my

analysis of the actual way of combining a compound's constituents will be based on the notion of thematic-relation availability and on the model of relation linking developed in psycholinguistics by Downing (1977), Cohen and Murphy (1984), Murphy (1988), Gagné and Shoben (1997) and Gagné and Spalding (2004; 2006).

3. The English and Latin terms for 'peninsula'

The Latin term, *paenīnsula*, is believed to have first appeared in *Ab urbe condita libri* by Livy (59 BC - 17 AD), 26,42 (Matz 2000, 121). Whether this was actually the first occurrence of the word in Latin is ultimately undeterminable. But the fact that Livy, as far as his modern editions show, used the two-word expression *paene īnsula* and the compound form *paeneīnsula* more often than the portmanteau *paenīnsula* attests that the blending of the latter was still incomplete at the time of his writing[1]. Moreover, Livy accompanied every instance of the expression with a detailed description of the geographical properties of the denotatum. In the case of Leucadia, he even provided the length and width of the isthmus in paces (33,17). Whether this was due to the nature of Livy's work (he was narrating military field operations) or to the need he felt to explain the intension of the novel expression also remains undeterminable. Either way, though, even if the expression was coined by Livy, contextual ostension would clarify its denotation without forcing the Latin reader to decode it compositionally. They needed no semantic glossing, though, for they knew the meanings of *paene* and īnsula as part of their basic lexical knowledge.

The English term, *peninsula*, is a 1530s loanword adapted from Latin, not a neoclassical compound or a calque like *demie island*, an expression of the 16th century, or *presqu'île*, the French term (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). If faced with the unfamiliar *peninsula*, the reader capable of segmenting the word and assigning semantic glosses to its components would obtain 'almost-island', ending up in the same position as that of the ancient Latin reader. But there would probably be no contextual information of the kind provided by Livy to help them picture the actual

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[1] The sources I used of Livy's work are the texts provided by Wikisource and the several editions assembled under the Perseus database (https://www.perseus.tufts.edu). The expression occurs in 25,11,1 and 11; 26,41; 31,40; 32,21; 33,17. Sources are inconsistent as to its orthography.

extension of the term. They would, then, have to proceed by assembling the two meanings and construing a new concept, in the hope of capturing the denotation of the source word.

3.1. *From 'island' to 'almost-island' to 'peninsula'*

'Island' is a complex concept, paraphrasable with the description "a tract of land surrounded by water", which corresponds to the dictionary definition (Webster and McKechnie 1983). The property 'surrounded by water' is not scalar, for a body of land is either surrounded by water or not. This is an essential condition of an island (the second one is being smaller than a continent). In *paen(e)insula* and *peninsula*, this essence is negated by *paen(e)/pen* 'almost', an adverb used adjectivally. This modifier makes *paen(e)insula* and *peninsula* semantically exocentric, since a 'quasi-island' is not a type of island. But, unlike 'non', a negative prefix, 'almost' shares some properties with quantifiers. It entails a non-numerical evaluation of the degree of a scalable quality. In forming the complex concept of 'peninsula', it picks out the attribute slot 'surrounded (by water)' of 'island', fills it with the value 'almost' (Cohen and Murphy 1984, 45-46) – an operation later called *property mapping* (Wisniewski 1996) – and thereby changes it into a scalar feature, making it the property that a body of land must possess in an absolute degree in order to qualify as an island. As a functional negation of the concept 'island', then, 'almost' predicates that the referent is not an island but is lacking the property essential to be so by a thin quantitative margin.

Faced with an expression having the literal meaning, 'almost-island', now the reader has to interrogate their world knowledge and stored experiences as observer of landscapes for the record of any entity that narrowly misses being an island. Hence, they retrieve the conception of a landform that extends into the water and is almost entirely surrounded by it, but which is still narrowly connected to the mainland, possibly by an easily overlooked land bridge[2]. This description almost exactly corresponds to the dictionary definition of the source term (Webster and McKechnie 1983).

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[2] Notice that the notion defies numerical assessment anyway. Even geographic nomenclature prescribes no quantitative parameter based on, for instance, the ratio of isthmus width to coastline length, for determining when a landform is to be called a 'peninsula'. The label is assigned pretheoretically or by historical convention.

4. The Japanese term for 'peninsula': 半島 'half-island'

The Japanese reader also has to first assign meaning to each of the expression's individual components. Suzuki maintains that they would gloss 半 as *nakaba* and 島 as *shima*. How they retrieve these words and determine their meanings is the core of Suzuki's reasoning and needs some explanation.

4.1. *The Japanese writing system and the pronunciation of Chinese characters*

After adopting Chinese as the official language of the state in the 7th century AD, the Japanese begun a painstaking process of adapting Chinese logograms to their own language. As a result, the Japanese writing system is now made of four distinct scripts. The one that is relevant here consists of a set of thousands of graphically adapted Chinese characters (commonly referred to as *kanji* or Sinograms), used to write content words and the invariable, meaning-bearing parts of verbs and adjectives. Each has two types of 'reading' or 'pronunciation'.

One, called '*on* reading', is a phonological adaptation of the ancient Chinese term that used to be written with that character. *Kanji* are read in this way in most two-character compounds because these compounds, which are very frequent in Chinese, were borrowed in Japanese as both graphic and phonological representations of concepts, just as they were in the source language. The lexeme for 'peninsula', 半島, is one of them. It is pronounced *hantō*, from the ancient Chinese word, now *bàndǎo* in Mandarin. Thus, the *on* readings of 半 and 島 are *han* and *tō* respectively[3]. These pronunciations are unimportant for Suzuki's argument. The need to interpret 半島 by means of assigning semantic glosses to each constituent *kanji* stems from the very fact that the reader has no lemma 半島 or *hantō* in their mental lexicon to begin with. A knowledge of the *on* readings, *han* and *tō*, and the ability to infer the actual pronunciation of the word are, therefore, irrelevant.

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[3] To navigate dictionary definitions, *kun* readings and their senses, and to extract the frequency of the positions of a given *kanji* in compounds, I relied on the following dictionaries: Tōdō 1980, Kaizuka, Fujino and Ono 1984, Spahn and Hadamitzky 1989, Nelson and Haig 1997, Guerra 2015, listing items by *kanji*, and on Masuda 1974, *Kōjien* 1976, *Gensen* 1986 and Matsumura 1988, listing lexemes phonetically. I will not refer again to the above sources when reporting the result of a dictionary search.

The second type of reading corresponds to the Japanese word expressing the same concept as the Chinese term originally written with that character. Thus, the Japanese write the spoken word /*shima*/ by means of <島>, just as the Chinese do in Mandarin /*dǎo*/. It is as if the English /*island*/ were written <島>, instead of <island>. Under this view, *kanji* turn into interlanguage (and even metalinguistic) symbols, ideograms that represent concepts in a purely graphic form independently of the many phonological realizations those concepts may have in the world's tongues. When used to pronounce a Sinogram, a vernacular Japanese word like *shima* becomes its '*kun* (= gloss) reading'.

When the Japanese study *kanji* at school, they learn the shape (in both handwriting and recognition) and the 'official' readings (*on* and *kun*) of it. Thus, in the case of 島, they have no problem retrieving *shima* and use this word to name the ideogram and express its meaning. I call this first operation '*kun*-glossing'. Very often, though, a *kanji* has more than one *kun* reading. For example, 生, a 1st Grade Sinogram, has 2 *on* readings and 10 *kun* readings (*Bunkachō* 2010). There are also *kanji* that share identical *kun* readings, each bearing a slightly different meaning. *Abura*, for instance, is shared by 5 characters, denoting various types of fat and oil. All this could be devastating for Suzuki's model. Luckily, neither problem occurs with *shima* and the issue can be ignored.

4.2. *Kun-glossing* 島 *and* 半

Thus, *kun*-glossing 島 with *shima* is a straightforward operation. As Suzuki does, I assume that the Japanese reader would assign the geography-related sense 'island', a landform, to this lexeme, ignoring the metaphorical sense 'restricted, isolated area'.

Construing 半 is much more complicated. *Nakaba* is indeed the Sinogram's only *kun* reading. Once it is used to gloss the *kanji*, as Suzuki's model requires, the whole operation of decoding the compound revolves around the category and meaning of it. The problem is that *nakaba* is a noun, not an adverbial like *paene* and *pen-*. It is listed in dictionaries as having the primary meaning 'midpoint' or 'center' in the domains of space, time and process. It takes a quantitative meaning, 'half', and an adverbial, metaphorical sense, 'almost', only in its secondary and tertiary usages. Thus, the reader has to first evaluate the function and meaning of *nakaba* as a noun and then find reasons to discard them in favor of an adverbial interpretation.

4.3. *Coordinate and subordinate interpretations*

When two nouns are conjoined to form a single word, the resulting compound can be coordinate. The constituents maintain their individual meanings and the complex word denotes a two-member set or a hybrid having the properties of both entities (Kageyama 1982; Namiki and Kageyama 2016; Bauer 2017). The two members, however, should be similar and the left-hand one should be more salient in cultural terms (Kageyama 1982; Wisniewski 1996; Namiki and Kageyama 2016). *Nakabashima* does not fulfill such requisites, as it would yield the incoherent 'midpoints-and-islands'.

Alternatively, the compound might be subordinate, in the sense that the components carry semantic roles as if they were governed by a verb. In such expressions, one constituent is the head and represents the type of object denoted by the complex word as a whole. This makes the compound semantically endocentric. The other element is the modifier, denoting an entity linked to the head concept by a thematic relation (Wisniewski 1996; Gagné and Shoben 1997; Shoben and Gagné 1997; Wisniewski and Love 1998). Since the verb that specifies the relation is unexpressed, the successful interpretation of a compound of this kind depends on inferring it correctly (relation-linking strategy; a list of the most frequent relational categories in Gagné and Shoben 1997, 72). The semantics of *nakaba* and *shima* makes for a consistent locative relation whereby one entity, either 'midpoint' or 'island', is located in the other. If 島 'island' is construed as the head, 半島 would mean 'midway island' and denote an island equidistant from some landmarks (place-theme interpretation). If, instead, the head is 半 'midpoint', the compound would mean 'island's center' (theme-place type).

As a principle, the more frequently a constituent occurs in the lexicon in a certain function or relation, the more probable it is that it bears the same function or relation in unfamiliar expressions as well. This type of facilitatory effect is very important in compound interpretation under different conceptions and functions ('availability' of thematic relations: Gagné and Shoben 1997; Gagné and Spalding 2004; 'morphological family size': Schreuder and Baayen 1997; Gagné 2011). As it turns out, the lexicon does not support a subordinate interpretation of 半島. Only 22 of the 207 compounds with 半 as the left-hand constituent that I extracted from dictionaries and the Internet (by search engine) are subordinate [4].

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[4] For this search, I did not use either *Kōjien* 1976 or Matsumura 1988.

Not unexpectedly, they are all locative. Of them, only 4 can be interpreted as having a place-theme role structure. They are 半音 'semitone' (a tone between two tones), 半調ぼかし 'half-tint' (a color that is intermediate between light and shade), 半旗 'flag at half-staff', 半ば過ぎ 'a spot past the midpoint'. Theme-place compounds are slightly better documented with 18 instances. The most relevant ones involving landscape features are 半江 'middle of a river', 半崖 'midpoint of a cliff' and 半嶺 'heart of the mountains'.

4.4. *Attributive interpretations*

In its secondary usage, *nakaba* is a quantifier meaning 'one half'. This is definitely the main usage of 半 but only when pronounced by the *on* reading *han*, not as *nakaba*. The occurrences of *nakaba* and 半 as quantifiers can be classified under three distinct functions.

1. *Exact quantification*. First, the quantity expressed by 'half' can be numerical and actually measured, as in, for instance, 半円 'semicircle' and 半減期 'half-life'; it may be measurable but only summarily assessed, as in 半馬身 and 半艇身 'half length' (used in horse and boat racing), 半分 'one-half', and 半舷値 'half watch'; or it may be implicit from the meaning of the other constituent(s), as in 半兄 'half-brother' (only one biological parent is shared) and 半舷斉射 'broadside' (a ship only has two sides). This usage is well documented among the 207 compounds having 半 as the left-hand constituent, with 76 items. If so used to modify 'island', 半 'half' would prescribe how large a portion of an original island must yet exist in order for that body of land to be counted as a member of the 'half-islands' class. Under this meaning, the compound is semantically endocentric and might denote an island truncated in two or a half-sunken island. An exact interpretation of 'half' is quite problematic in relation to islands, though, for how could an ordinary person compute the relative size of island parts and use 半島 correctly? And how useful would such a term be in science? An expression whose extension is so difficult to identify is of very little utility and its existence as a lexical item seems implausible.

2. *Approximate quantification*. In this function, 半 does not denote an exact part but a portion large enough to be relevant and it expresses the fact that the object is reduced in size but not to the extent that it loses its function or becomes unnoticeable. Examples are 半弓 'half-bow' and 半鐘 'half-bell', 半帆 'reduced sail', and 半解 'only half-understood'.

The modified element (i.e., the head) often denotes a telic process, as in 半熟 'half-boiled'. This group's attributive compounds are almost all semantically endocentric. Exceptions are those few exocentric expressions like 半神半獣 'half-god, half-beast' in which a hybrid entity is designated by means of quantifying the two essential properties of it. I identified approximate quantification in 54 items. This interpretation is still problematic. If 半島 is not an island of a precise size but merely an islet or a somehow relevant portion of an island, wherein 半 'half' connotes the fact that the portion in question is large enough to be salient, the issue still arises of how to identify it. For the use of 半島 to be licensed by convention, a shared criterion must exist that enables speakers to determine how large island chunks should be in order to be granted the status of half-islands (and what would the remaining island-parts be called then?) or, conversely, how small certain islands should be in order to be considered 'half-islands' and not just tiny and yet true, full islands. What would count as a 'full island' then?

3. *Metaphorical quantification.* This usage corresponds to the adverbial function of *nakaba* listed at the very end of dictionary entries. *Nakaba* now takes the meaning 'almost', 'incompletely', 'partially'. It is with this meaning that 半 modifies unquantifiable abstract nouns like 'life' in 半生 'half alive', color terms like 'white' in 半白 'half white' (a very light tint), and actions like 'kill' in 半殺し 'half dead'. Commonly unquantifiable states can also be modified by 半, as in 半裸体 'seminude', 半醒 'half sober', and 半永久的 'semipermanent'. I identified metaphorical quantification in 55 items. This usage of 'half' is found in English as well, as Suzuki himself acknowledges in his translation. It makes 半 *nakaba* correspond to *paene*, *pen-*, *semi*, etc. and, if recognized, would put the Japanese reader on the same interpretive path as the Latin and well-educated English reader. They could, therefore, construe *nakaba-shima* as a portion of land having certain relevant features not sufficient to make it a true island but salient enough for it to be (mis)taken for an island, perhaps at least half of the time.

4.5. *Decoding* 半島

After the above process, the Japanese reader ends up with no fewer than six alternative outcomes. Now they have to assess the absolute and relative weight of each of them by evaluating their semantic consistency and frequency based on their lexical knowledge and familiarity with similar

expressions. They can exclude an interpretation of the compound as coordinate due to a lack of coherence but cannot easily ignore a subordinate interpretation, even if scarcely represented in the lexicon, because the two locative construals are consistent, conceptually plausible and robust. As regards the possibility of the compound being attributive, interpretations based on exact and approximate quantification cause more problems than they solve and they lose the competition with metaphoric quantification, which matches simple, daily-life heuristics in a much closer way.

The final decision can only follow encyclopedic validation. When interrogating their world knowledge, the Japanese reader now retrieves the same concept as their Latin and English counterparts. The denotation 'landform protruding into the sea' overrides all other interpretations because it matches an existing encyclopedia entry. It also corresponds to the dictionary definition (Matsumura 1988). The reader has thus managed to retrace the metaphorical process, overcome the exocentricity of the source expression and infer its exact denotation. This is a significant feat for, as noticed, if 'half-islands' are not islands, they might be anything.

5. Conclusions

Capturing the concept 'peninsula' by means of semantically glossing the constituents of *paenīnsula* and *peninsula* is quite a straightforward operation, for the adverbials, *paene* and *pen-* 'almost', channel the process in the right direction from the very beginning. Meaning retrieval is more complex and longer for 半島 'half-island' because interpreters must first infer that 半 *nakaba* 'half' is used as a metaphorical quantifier. Once they have done so, though, they solve the puzzle as easily as the Latin and English reader does.

The process succeeds in linking the terms to their extension, i.e., the many peninsula-like geographic entities in the world, and consequently to their intension, the concept 'peninsula', because the terms are common nouns. Unlike proper names, which designate individual objects, *peninsula* and 半島 denote a large class of geographical features whose individual members are recurrent in the landscape, are an easy object of epistemic experience and are categorized as a single concept.

Short of calling the landscape feature by means of a singular root, which Latin, English, Chinese and Japanese people could well have

done, the expressions 'quasi island' and, to a lesser degree, 'half-island', are the most frugal way to name it. Actually, that languages of both groups adopted a nearly identical word-formation principle suggests that, conceptually, such a strategy is, perhaps, the best one to name the object because the expressions encode the simplest possible description of it. However tiny, that piece of semantic information is enough to identify the actual referent.

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